Take Action! We've made it simple:

1. CLICK HERE to tell your legislators it's time for stronger protection of our water
2. Use our pre-written letter or customize it to your liking
3. Hit send!

Polluters of our waterways should be held accountable for their impacts on our water, our health and our fish.

The Problem

Clean water is essential for our health, and especially critical for our children. Cold, clean water is also essential to the health of our fish and shellfish[1].

That's why, in 1972, Congress passed the landmark Clean Water Act and set the goal of "fishable, swimmable, and drinkable" for all our nation's waterways, declaring that "the discharge of pollutants into the navigable waters be eliminated by 1985."

But, throughout the country, we are far from meeting this goal – including right here in Washington. One major reason: the agriculture industry has been exempted from federal rules designed to achieve this goal, and our state has no permit system in place to regulate many agricultural practices.

A number of these unrelated agricultural practices send harmful pollutants[2] into our waterways, degrading our water, destroying vital habitat and endangering our fish.

Other industries that use land -- such a timber harvesting and land development -- operate under regulatory requirements and permitting systems to protect our waterways. For agriculture, however, protecting our waterways from polluted run-off is voluntary, and farmers are merely encouraged to use "best management practices."

The voluntary approach that has been tried for decades is insufficient. A recent GAO report of nationwide trends finds that "at historical funding levels and water body restoration rates, it would take longer than 1,000 years to restore all the water bodies that are now impaired by non-point source pollution."

And according to the Environmental Protection Agency, "agricultural nonpoint source pollution was the leading source of water quality impacts on surveyed rivers and lakes, the second largest source of impairments to wetlands, and a major contributor to contamination of surveyed estuaries and ground water."

In Washington, over three quarters of state water pollution clean-up funds were used to clean up waters contaminated by agriculture.

Negative Effects

[1] Doc 17, page 68:

[2] Doc 17, page 86

Many farms use chemical pesticides, fertilizers and manure. Unlined manure lagoons at feedlots leach into groundwater aquifers, often contaminating neighboring wells. Farming to the edge of our streams causes pesticides, fertilizers, and land-applied manure to enter into our waterways, which can result in harmful impacts to:

Fish Health– Learn More

Stream Health – Learn More

Public Health – Learn More

The Solution

The answer is simple.

Streamside buffers help other industries, such as timber harvesting and land development, dramatically reduce stream pollution.

Mandatory buffers can help the agriculture industry do its part to protect our water resources, too.

Requiring 100 feet of natural vegetation between farmland and our waterways would keep most pesticides, fertilizers, cows and manure out of our streams. Trees and other natural vegetation alongside our waterways would promote healthy habitat for salmon.

Learn More About Riparian Buffers >

According to opinion polls conducted among 600 Washingtonians in 2012 and again in 2014 (margin of error of plus/minus 4 percent):

Three-quarters of Washingtonians are concerned about the impact of agricultural practices on our water resources.

Three-quarters of Washingtonians support stronger laws protecting the health of our water resources in Washington.

Most Washingtonians believe that protecting our water resources is even more important than growing our economy. Only about a third of Washingtonians believe economic growth is more important than clean water.

Two-thirds of Washingtonians support 100-foot natural buffers between agriculture lands and streams.

1. Grazing cattle, pesticides, manure, and fertilizer run-off contaminate rivers and streams, deplete water quality, erode riverbanks and harm habitat.

2. By creating a 100 foot riparian buffer, we can stabilize stream banks and foster vegetation critical for water quality and salmon health.

3. Riparian buffers are a simple, natural way to mitigate much of the harm caused by pesticides, fertilizers, and tilling and grazing at the edge of waterways and streams.

We must to ensure that our children and future generations have water that is fishable, swimmable and drinkable.

Contact your local elected officials and tell them to keep polluted run-off out of our waterways. >

Have you witnessed an incident of harmful water pollution? Report it here!

Our Partners

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt magna aliquam erat volutpat.

About Us

What's Upstream? is a project of the Center for Environmental Law and Policy, the Environmental Protection Agency, the People for Puget Sound, Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, the Puget Sound Partnership, the Swinomish Tribal Indian Community, the Western Environmental Law Center, and the Washington Environmental Council. Our goal is to inform the public about leading causes of water pollution and how that pollution affects the health of Washington's waterways, people and fish. The What's Upstream project is made possible by a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency.

If you have any questions please contact us:
info@whatsupstream.com

RESEARCH PAGE

The Clean Water Act of 1972 is the primary way the federal government prevents pollution from entering our waterways.

The Clean Water Act set a national goal of ensuring that all our waterways are fishable, swimmable, and drinkable. But are they? Major exemptions to the law granted to the agriculture industry are putting this goal at risk – in addition to the health of our fish, our waters and our people.

Fish Health – Are Our Waterways Fishable?

Many sources lead to pollution impairments of Washington's waterways, but agriculture is the largest. Cow manure, pesticide and fertilizer run-off, and agricultural practices that disturb riparian habitat increase stream temperatures and decrease dissolved oxygen levels, which is deadly for salmon and shellfish.

- D-051871

In 1991, the federal government listed Snake River sockeye salmon as endangered. In the next few years, 16 more populations of salmon in Washington were listed as either threatened or endangered because of polluted habitat, not harvest. Habitat is not improving, even under the Endangered Species Act.

- Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife: Salmon Recovery and Restoration

Stream Health – Are Our Waterways Swimmable?

A recent GAO report of nationwide trends finds that "at historical funding levels and water body restoration rates, it would take longer than 1,000 years to restore all the water bodies that are now impaired by non-point source pollution."

- GAO Report: Clean Water Act: Changes Needed If Key EPA Program Is to Help Fulfill the Nation's Water Quality Goals

Public Health – Are Our Waterways Drinkable?

Manure contains nitrates, which are contaminants that produce immediate (within hours or days) health effects upon exposure. High doses can cause pregnant mothers to miscarry and can cause babies to get "blue baby syndrome" (methemoglobinemia), which can be fatal. High nitrate levels may also increase the risk of spontaneous abortions and other birth defects.

- Andrea's documents
- Andrea's map of Puget Sound Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)

Habitat Health – How Riparian Buffers Ensure Our Waterways Are Fishable, Swimmable and Drinkable and Protect Us from Agricultural Pollution

Streamside habitat is critical for good water quality and salmon health. Riparian vegetation provides shade to stream channels, contributes large woody debris to streams, adds small organic matter to streams, stabilizes stream banks, controls sediment inputs from surface

erosion, and regulates nutrient and pollutant inputs to streams. Riparian buffers can mitigate much of the harm caused by pesticides, fertilizers, and farming and grazing to the edge of waterways and streams.

- Doc 22
- Doc 23
- Doc 28
- Mantech Chapter 6

Washington's Current Regulations

All states are required to implement the federal Clean Water Act. Washington's current regulatory framework for protecting our waterways from pollution is the product of a handful of separate statutes.

A summary of the state's plan to address non-point source pollution can be found here.

The state's voluntary water quality "Best Management Practices" for agriculture can be found here.

Water Quality Improvement Plans

The state Department of Ecology currently manages 62 water quality improvement projects throughout Washington. To learn more or find out about the project nearest to you, click here.

Public Opinion

What's Upstream? partners have conducted opinion research among Washingtonians over the past three years about the importance of clean and healthy waterways. A summary of the results is included below.

- Summary page